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Henry Roth's Short Fiction (1940-1980): A Geography Of Loss

Martín Urdiales Shaw

1 If one is called on to cite the most repeatedly addressed topic in relation to Henry Roth as a fiction writer, both by Roth himself and by his scholarship, this is undoubtedly the peculiar progress of his writing career. Author of the masterpiece *Call It Sleep* at only 28 years of age, Roth stumbled on a creative block which lasted forty years, in the course of which the manuscript of a second novel was burned and only a handful of stories – by the standards of a writer who had published a demanding first novel of over 400 pages – were published. As is well known, Roth finally achieved his 'redemption' with fiction, over the last twenty-five years of his life, with the writing of the *Mercy of a Rude Stream* four-volume work, published in the 1990s.

2 The reasons for this early stilted career, as set down by Bonnie Lyons in a section of *Henry Roth: The Man and His Work*, were complex. As Lyons points out, crucial to Roth's inability to produce a second novel after *Call It Sleep* were two key factors: on the one hand, Roth was financially sustained by his lover and patron Eda Lou Walton during the writing of his work; on the other, the intellectual climate at the height of the Depression was so sensitive to politicalization that reviews of Roth's novel – both favourable and unfavourable – were construed exclusively in political terms (see Lyons 15-19), critics paying scarce or no attention to the work's accomplishment in terms of its modernist aesthetics. These two factors combined in working up Roth's guilt at the final outcome of *Call It Sleep*, and triggered his subsequent desire to write a 'social novel,' an event which was the onset of his loss as a writer, and which was added on to the earlier trauma of having lost his place as a Jew.[1] Roth's gradual recovery of a literary voice was the corollary in a chain of events initially triggered by the critical reappraisal of *Call It Sleep* in 1956, when Alfred Kazin and Leslie Fiedler both pointed it out in an issue of *The American Scholar* on "The Most Undeservedly Neglected Book of the Past 25 Years," this being the only novel mentioned twice. This eventually led to the rediscovery of Henry Roth, who had retired to a farmland in rural Maine, to the renewal of the copyright, and to the

reissuing of the novel in paperback in 1964, with astonishing success and sales (Lyons 27). The atypical history of Roth's literary career as a novelist has been frequently addressed by the author himself and his interviewers, and would eventually become a source for reflection for the mature artist in *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, who, in dialogue with his other self across time, laments the lost years of creative stagnation following the publication of this novel of youth.

3 The following highlights how a significant part of Roth's short fiction (and certain related pieces) within the period 1940-1980, can shed light on Roth's perpetual discomfort with a sense of place, both as an artist and as a Jew, by providing a highly idiosyncratic, and often symbolic, geography of loss.[2] My use of the term 'loss' here aims at conveying Roth's uneasiness with his sense of place in both aesthetic and ethnic terms, but also because this concept reflects the sense of trauma attendant to such uneasiness. This loss seems to me codified within a geography, because taken as a body of work, most of Roth's stories, and some later non-fictional pieces, recurrently portray protagonists – or Roth himself – trying to reach or move into other places across socio-economic, ethno-cultural, historical or political maps. In this respect, it is interesting to note that recent criticism of Roth similarly emphasises geographical instability in labelling the two main parts of the writer's *oeuvre*: Mario Materassi's anthology of the short works is entitled *Shifting Landscape*[3], while Werner Sollors' thorough essay on *Call It Sleep* foregrounds in its title Roth's sentence "A world somewhere, somewhere else" (Wirth-Nesher, *New Essays* 127-88).

1. David Schearl's geography of loss and the loss of Henry Roth

4 A brief reminder of the importance of place for the boy David Schearl in *Call It Sleep* may be relevant here, since it is in this complex first novel that Roth provides unresolved tensions that seem to persist beyond the ambiguity of the novel's ending. David Schearl, having survived a near-fatal electrocution, is on the verge of sleep in a closing paragraph where the welter of impressions is aesthetically convincing, yet leaves unclear what significance (if any) the rail's revelation – the blast of electric power – has had for David, or, for that matter, what "it" is that the boy "might as well call... sleep" (*Call It Sleep* 441), as he lies in bed in the ensuing, final, scene.

5 Sollors describes this passage as a "masterpiece at sustaining ambiguity" and goes on to compile over a score of different critical readings for David's "it" (156-57). The ambiguity of the novel's ending echoes the pervasive instability of meaning throughout the novel, continuously instanced at both the audial and the visual levels, through, for example, the juxtaposition of languages or the significance attributed to physical environment, which is in a constant state of flux. In David Schearl's experience, the interpretation of physical space is polarised in terms of continuous, sudden and unexpected shifts between contentment/wonder/relief and fear/awe/guilt: home or the *cheder* vs. the East Side streets, the old country vs. East Side, a Christian household vs. a Jewish environment, the cellar vs. the river, and even the streetcar rails. None of these is eventually endowed with a stable meaning. Home, for example, is initially related to contentment and security through the presence of David's mother, yet it is here that his father's violence reaches a climax at the end, driving him out. The streets are often a source of wonder and

discovery, but these feelings suddenly change into fear and trauma when David becomes lost or is chased by a gang. A similar instability applies to other environments, such as the river, where David is enjoying a solitary reverie, only to be suddenly taunted by three Irish boys, or to the streetcar rail, where the terrified David is first made to cause an electrical discharge which ironically elates him, and yet is later almost killed by a similar event. No order seems eventually to be established for David in his physical and perceptual universe. His association of Isaiah's burning coal in the Old Testament to the electric flash of light and heat as a means of redemption, reveals the imaginative leap of an over-sensitive, intelligent boy, but in itself remains arbitrary and devoid of further meaning.

6 As Leslie Fiedler has pointed out (23) there is certainly the indication, in the sequence of David's recovery of consciousness, that the new voice, which intermittently starts gaining strength amid the multicultural Babel surrounding him, is that of the artist's that will some day write the novel we have been reading.[4] However, the passage of the boy into the young artist – suggested by the aesthetic vision of the closing paragraphs – did not work for Roth outside the fictional boundaries of *Call It Sleep*. Roth himself admitted that the end of his book "begins to open up, to shoot out in all directions" (Freedman 152-53) and indeed David's near-death ultimately seems to reveal a failed attempt at an act of closure of a traumatic period in Roth's past.[5]

7 In an illuminating discussion on autobiographical self-representation in Joyce's and Proust's *Bildungsroman*, Paul Jay highlights the relevance in these texts of "putting to death [the writer's] own past and his own past self," which at the same time "represents his rebirth as an artist" (144). Regardless of the degree to which *Call It Sleep* may lend itself to analysis as an autobiographical text, it seems clear that Roth attempted this kind of closure through David's accident, yet failed on account of not having really told all.[6] Thus he could not, at that point, lay the past "to rest in the very act of giving it life in a fictional form" (Jay 146). Primarily, Roth had not told all, because in its final form *Call It Sleep* is not, strictly speaking, a *Bildungsroman*, and the David who reawakens from the electric shock is still years away from becoming the artist.[7] Secondly, Roth had not told all, because in *Call It Sleep* he modified the representation of David's familial relationships by choosing to omit a sister, who was significantly related to anxieties which become clear in *A Diving Rock on the Hudson*.

8 In this respect, it comes as no surprise that Roth's attempt at 'another place' as a novelist, seeking out an overtly social emphasis and a non-autobiographical subject, would ultimately fail, the manuscript of this novel being burnt by the author himself in 1946.[8] Roth was not only distancing himself from the continuity *Call It Sleep* demanded, but also yielding to external pressures he could not negotiate as an artist:

> the Party's demand that you write as a social realist and that you write objectively and that you write about the proletariat and the revolution and so forth had the effect of pinning me against the wall. Since it was the last thing I could really do it had the effect of making me overly self-conscious as a writer. Trying to write, you might say, with an eye on the revolution, or on the Party, trying to write with a maximum of social consciousness was not the kind of thing that I was cut out for. (46)

9 Roth's quest for another literary place had begun. This quest, often ending in paralysis or arrested movement, would project itself in a number of stories, and would only be resolved with a re-doubling of the self-representational theme in *Call It Sleep*: the mature unfulfilled artist vis-à-vis the aspiring artist in *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, the long-deferred

closure that *Call It Sleep* had originally called for. In an overview of Henry Roth's *oeuvre* one might label the stories, as well as some story-related memoir fragments included in *Shifting Landscape*, as a huge interruption of what Roth would have wanted to do throughout his writing career: an extended *Bildungsroman* which, as he finally managed it, opens with *Call It Sleep* in 1934 and continues with *Mercy of a Rude Stream* in the seventies and eighties.

2. The Early Stories (1940): Places Beyond

10 Two of Roth's first stories following *Call It Sleep*, "Somebody Always Grabs the Purple" and "Many Mansions," both published in 1940, implicitly hint at an estrangement from socio-economic or cultural milieus. Unlike Roth's first published story ("Broker," 1939), these two stories have a clearly recognisable autobiographical subject, an imaginative and sensitive boy, very much a less shy David Schearl. "Somebody Always Grabs the Purple" is a brief sketch of Sammy Farber's reactions at finding the *Purple Fairy Book* he wants to read taken by another boy at the local library. His attempts at cajoling first the librarian and then the boy to let him have the book fail, and the story ends with the other boy actually checking it out in defiance, while Sammy watches helplessly.

11 One of the main strengths of this story is Roth's skill in subtly conveying the negative weight that Sammy's Jewish background has in both encounters. Feelings of cultural and ethnic alienation are hinted at from the start, as Sammy enters for the first time the 123rd Street Branch Library and awkwardly addresses the librarian as "teacher," asking if his library card address should be now updated, since he has recently moved. The librarian, stereotyped as "a spare woman, graying and impassive, with a pince-nez" (63) checks the cleanliness of his hands, apparently after recognising the boy's ex-address as a Jewish neighbourhood. Sammy's request for the 'Purple Fairy Book' follows, together with a spontaneous outburst about his mother's remarks that he's too old to read "stories with a bear" (fairy tales), a reference to Yiddish folklore which baffles the librarian. Regretting the cultural difference his remark has inadvertently revealed, Sammy concludes apologetically, "Yeah, she don't know English good" (63). To the librarian's later suggestion that he read an adventure book, "very popular with boys" (64), Sammy retorts "I don't see what's popular about them. If a man finds a treasure in an adventure book, so right away it's with dollars and cents. Who cares from dollars and cents? I got enough of that in my house" (64). Roth's contextualization of this story in a 1983 interview sheds further light on the relationship between ethnic identity and the cultural values attached to the two literary genres:

> Moving to Harlem [in 1914] was a disaster. Judaism was my framework, and striving for material success was a vital, visible aspect of it on the East Side. But this was exactly what my little Gentile cronies mocked: Money! Money! Their scorn helped make Judaism repugnant. And once that happened, my identity disintegrated too... I read every fairy tale, every myth there was in the library. In other words, it became kind of a dream world, a fantasy world, I'm sure. Whereas the other kids at that time, Jewish and non-Jewish, were reading Horatio Alger's *From Bootblack to Millionaire* or what have you, with me, that no longer had any appeal. That was Jewish. (66)

12 The other story, "Many Mansions," published later in 1940, is in significant ways complementary to "Somebody Always Grabs the Purple." Although Roth asserted in a 1985 interview that it is based on an account of his boyhood friend Gus (73), the story is a

first-person narrative whose general tone and feeling suggest a strong degree of identification with the anonymous boy protagonist. In this respect, Mario Materassi highlights in *Shifting Landscape* Roth's regret "at not having creatively appropriated his friend Gus's interesting life" for a whole novel (73-74). Opening with a Fitzgeraldian statement, "When I was ten years old I became a collector of mansions" (69) this tale focuses on a boy's fascination with another unknown realm, that of the New York rich, which has led him to memorise the owners and exteriors of all the mansions on 'Millionaires' Row.' When one Senator Stover – dweller of the "wonderfullest" (72) of these mansions – offers to show him in, the boy is enthused but runs away as they are about to cross the threshold, oppressed by "the prospect of beholding in reality all that I had read in the newspapers and all I had conjured out of daydream and music... I felt as if there was something I already possessed that I might lose if I entered" (72).

13 As in "Somebody Always Grabs the Purple," there is again the fascination, to reuse Sollors's essay title, of "A world somewhere, somewhere else" painfully literalized by the physical proximity – yet socio-economic distance – of the houses on Fifth Avenue which the boy regards with awe. Interestingly, there is no clear reference in the story to the boy's background, and his speech is adolescent slang rather than Yiddish-inflected, but one might surmise that this is a Jewish East Side son of immigrant parents – as were Gus and Roth themselves – fantasising on how the (Gentile) other half lives. Like the contents of the *Purple Fairy Tale* book, the inside of Senator Stover's house remains a space to be fantasised upon, a place apart and beyond the Jewish commonplace, and the boy's last-minute refusal to enter remains linked to his inclination to visualise this 'world elsewhere' exclusively in mythical terms: his first impression of Senator Stover is that "he looked like the old fisherman in the Arabian Nights who had opened the vase and let out the Djinn" (70) and he later describes his organ as having "wood in it from Sherwood Forest where Robin Hood used to live" (72). Within the boy's mind, American material wealth, largely an exclusive Gentile domain before 1945, is thus drawn in terms of that mythical Other which also informs the protagonist's anxieties in "Somebody Always Grabs the Purple," and the two stories ultimately underscore the anxiety *cum* desire that these 'places beyond' the working-class Jewish consciousness generate.

14 But these two 1940 stories, composed shortly after Roth's exertion and attendant guilt in the production of *Call It Sleep*, also seem to echo in different ways the predicament of a writer looking for, but unable to find, a different literary space. In its exchange between the librarian and Sammy Farber, "Somebody Always Grabs the Purple" is centrally about literary genre and the opposition fantasy/reality (as embodied, in children's literature, by fairy tales vs. adventure books). It can be read as allegorically encoding Roth's predicament and guilt, which herald his imminent paralysis, resulting from having accomplished an experimental novel and not being able to produce the social fiction that would be expected of him as a writer from the Left. In a similar sense, the anonymous protagonist of "Many Mansions," fantasising with an imagined world but unable to experience it perceptually, seems to enact Roth's position vis-à-vis a creative block that was fundamentally conditioned by his maladjustment to social realism. When he affirms his choice of "all I had conjured out of daydream and music" (72) by fleeing from the threshold of the Senator's mansion, the boy-hero of this story is largely endorsing the aesthetics of a subjective consciousness, with its related mythologising, at the expense of the (f)actual conditions of 'the real.'

15 These two 1940 stories would mark the end of Roth's career as a young writer. His famous writer's block would set in, and the artist of the thirties became a waterfowl farmer in rural Maine. Roth's next published story, "Petey and Yotsee and Mario" (1956), was described by Materassi as marking "a tentative, almost a groping comeback" (*Shifting Landscape* 93). This tale returns to the childhood material of *Call It Sleep*, through a radical revision of the anti-Semitic content of the Irish children riverside episode. In *Call It Sleep*, three Irish boys ridicule David's Jewishness and eventually terrorise him into throwing a metal strip across the rails, whereas here, Petey, Yotsee and Mario become Fat's rescuers when he starts floundering in the river, his mother then baking them a Jewish cake in gratitude. This subversion of content in a scene with identical, yet largely de-ethnicized, players evinces Roth's attempts at revising *Call It Sleep*'s mystique of the Jewish child's superior sensibility (and its attendant victimisation role)[9]. It thus moves towards socially-grounded fictions: "in the interim [between 1934 and 1959] my soul had been scrubbed by Marxism-Leninism and the new look about the proletariat" (Lyons 175). In fact, the tale goes so far in reversing the earlier episode's linking of Jewishness to victimisation, that Roth has it conclude with an ironic line at the expense of the mother's sense of Jewish particularity: "What kind of people would they be if they didn't like Jewish cake? Would they have even saved you?" (96).

3. The End of the Fifties: Arrested Motions

16 The second stage of Roth's particular quest for a literary space, this time more specifically expressed in terms of the 'artist in the process of recovering his art' emerges as the dismal McCarthy period comes to an end, with two stories which complement each other in a dialogic relationship while they shed light on Roth's gradual liberation from writer's block: "At Times in Flight: A Parable" (1959) and "The Dun Dakotas" (1960). Both pieces function in very much the same allegorical terms as "Somebody Always Grabs the Purple" and "Many Mansions," although now the allegory is made explicit by Roth and the stress is laid more on a sense of arrested motion, rather than on an unrealisable transition. "At Times in Flight," a first person narrative, opens with Roth's explicit allusion to his creative problems in 1938:

> I was then engaged in writing a second novel, which I had agreed to complete for my publisher. I had already written quite a section, and this opening section had been accepted and extolled. It was only necessary for me to finish it, and that was all. But it went badly from then on; in fact it had gone badly before I reached Z [Yaddo] (99).

17 These are vaguely framed by time-blurred recollections of Yaddo colony then and the early stages of his relationship with Muriel (Martha in the story). The second, and central, section of the story – by contrast much more graphically focused – projects Roth's identification of his artist self with the tragedy of a racehorse that falls in mid-race, and is subsequently shot, having broken a leg. Roth performs this identification in deliberate and over-explicit terms, ending with the reflection of the horse's fall and death as "a scene that I should muse on a great deal, of a horse destroyed when the race became real" (104).

18 As Bonnie Lyons observes, the reality of this race is an unclear symbol, which could enact an exclusively creative dilemma or the negative external influences that the socio-political panorama of 1938 then had for Roth.[10] In a 1986 conversation with Materassi,

Roth specifically clarified the symbolic value of the racehorse as equating art with the mythical Pegasus. Since Roth's great achievement in fiction, *Call It Sleep*, had been so closely indebted to an immature financial and emotional dependence on Eda Lou Walton, in her multiple role as lover/patron/surrogate mother, Roth saw in his meeting with Muriel a transition into adulthood and responsibility, which he thought would necessarily entail the sacrifice of his artist self to the demands of a new committed and responsible life (105).

19 Paradoxically, however, "At Times in Flight" may also be hinting at a hopeful recovery in its closing dialogue. Even though the story is explicitly posited, as Materassi puts it, as "a 'parable' concerning the death of the artist as creator" (98), his last words to Martha ("lead the way back... you've got a better sense of direction than I have" [104]) convey a positive note of faith. Since this "parable" actually juxtaposes two chronological perspectives, the Yaddo experience in 1938 and its re-creation twenty-one years later, in Roth's foreshadowing of Muriel's role in redirecting his life there can also be a present (1959) intuition of her as redeemer of his art.[11] This covertly amends his initial impression that life with Muriel would bring about the death of his artist self. The debt to M[uriel] is often foregrounded in the discourse of the senior Ira in *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, and can be justifiably traced to a period when, however tentatively, Roth is writing again and visualising a way out of his writer's block, as the ensuing story undoubtedly makes evident.

20 The shorter "The Dun Dakotas" complements "At Times in Flight" in that it returns again to the symbolic projection of the writer's block, but now to emphasise its eventual exorcising and final movement beyond. Roth's own explanation of the story as "a recollection, in part, of both the prologue [of the aborted second novel] and the complete blocking" (111) sheds light on what is a peculiar exercise in allegorical and autobiographical metanarrative. Roth opens the story with reflections on his wasted life as a writer which then become allegorically embodied in "a story, a yarn" (108) which Roth re-members from the prologue in the manuscript of the destroyed novel. The yarn imbedded in the story deals with the attempted entry of white settlers into the territory of the Dakotas in order to carry out a topographical survey in the 1870s. Throughout several interviews (109-112) Roth insisted on the sense of the loss of history this fable conveys. In this connection, Lyons assumes the scene to be a metaphor for Roth and the writers of his generation, attempting "to find a way around or through the impasse of the waste land vision" (149) appropriately embodied in the emptiness of this mountainous terrain.[12]

21 Detained by the Dakota chief and his men, the scout leader parleys and lets the chief beat him at poker for the sake of getting ahead on their surveying mission. When the scout asks if they now may proceed, this story – itself an abridged reconstruction of the lost prologue – becomes an instant allegory of self-reflection, foregrounding Roth's 1935 artistic predicament in a metafictional mode: "The chief... dreamed a long dream or a long thought – [of what]...I do not know. But that was as far as I got for over twenty-five years, waiting for the decision of the chief who had turned into stone or legend" (109). The scout becomes Roth, attempting to enter a new realm of creation in his second novel, but arrested into paralysis by and with the chief's prolonged silence.

22 Speaking to Materassi in 1986, Roth admitted "who this chief is, or what he represents, I really don't know. It's a subconscious barrier of some kind" (112). Eventually Roth points at his artistic redemption by returning to the Chief Dakota 'yarn' for the concluding lines

of the tale: "'Will the chief let us pass?' the scout repeated. 'Always remember Great Chief.' And the chief unfolded his arms and motioned them the way of their journey. 'Go now,' he said" (109). By using an openly geographical framework, this ending fully inscribes the story within Roth's metaphors of arrested motions/impossible transits for his own situation vis-à-vis the creative process. It does this more explicitly than in the 1940 tales, and more richly than "At Times in Flight," where the horse-race remains either a too abstruse metaphor or an excessively narrow symbol of rivalry, to represent the loss of artistic powers. The particular geographical imagery in "Dun Dakotas," the white settler entering Native lands, is rich in evocation, since it not only suggests the overcoming of a creative wasteland, but also heralds Roth's will to enter and chart an unknown literary territory which may at the same time embody a return to the author's sense of a "native self." Both the *Mercy of a Rude Stream* saga and its forerunner, the tale "Itinerant Ithacan" (1977), would, in terms of form and content respectively, fulfil each of these premises.

4. 1960-1980: the way (back) to Jewishness and the novel.

23 If the stories in these first twenty years since *Call It Sleep* deal with Roth's allegorical negotiation of his loss as an artist, up to a final exorcism in "Dun Dakotas," a similar period, broadly ranging from 1960 to 1980, is devoted to a second coming to terms, that of his identity as a Jew. This concern is firstly embodied in the superb story "The Surveyor" (1966) and extends all the way up to "Itinerant Ithacan" (1977) but is also relevant in other very brief memoir pieces, mostly written in the late seventies, such as "The Wrong Place" (notes taken in 1965-66; published, 1978), "No Longer at Home" (1971), "Kaddish" (1977), "Report from Mishkenot Sha'ananim" (1977) and "Vale Atque Ave" (1977), most of which are only discussed briefly, as specific stages of Roth's geographical and spiritual quest towards the location of Jewish identity.[13]

24 Like "The Dun Dakotas," "The Surveyor" again involves a topographical mission, the location of a now-forgotten *quemadero* (stake) in Seville by a middle-aged American Jew and his wife, who plan to leave a symbolic tribute at the exact spot where relapsed or crypto-Jews were burned in Inquisition times. As the layering of history has it, the old stake is now, in the 1960s, next to a patriotic icon of Christian Spain, the statue of "El Cid." Aaron Stigman cannot avoid the interrogation of Franco's *grises*, but refuses an explanation, aware of the potential risks in a country where Church and government stand in close alliance. A knowledgeable city lawyer eventually intercedes before the police, later revealing to the Stigmans his memories of a grandfather lighting a candle on Friday nights, and thus his own Jewish ancestry. The idea for the story derives from Roth's discovery of a medieval map of Seville, in the course of his six-month stay there in 1965-66, when he was hoping to gather material for a historical novel on a crypto-Jew joining the Spanish imperial venture in America. Roth's factual Seville experiences, as they were reassembled, over a decade later, in a memoir piece entitled "The Wrong Place" (1978), merit some examination as an interesting counterpoint to "The Surveyor." Whereas the story stresses the symbolic relevance of Stigman's clandestine mission – the tribute to the medieval Jewish martyrs in a culturally alien territory – in "The Wrong Place" Roth devotes significant attention to the reverse process of his own peculiar fascination with Catholicism. This is mainly embodied in the aesthetic appeal of Seville's

Cathedral: "It's easy, I muse, as I stand there raptly gazing up at the stained-glass windows that shine like ethereal retablos, it's easy to accept Catholicism. It's beautiful" (244). Roth later exits the Cathedral, wondering "What do I believe now?" (246), and this polarised state of mind on the subject of ethnicity and faith becomes evocative of earlier protagonists in his stories, attempting, but not quite achieving, transits into oppositional spaces.

25 Unquestionably, "The Wrong Place" is intended as an ironic reflection on having experienced Spain in order "to reunite with Judaism – via a side door!... What a detour" (248). Yet various aspects of the Catholic faith in Seville are highlighted almost obsessively, underscoring a morbid fascination with what, in reading "The Surveyor" alone, only emerges dimly as the faith of the oppressor. The two writings coalesce strangely, and in my view, illustrate the sinuous progress of a writer who, even as composing his first story on the rediscovery of Judaic roots, paradoxically becomes allured by its main religious Other.

26 A summary review of the pieces written throughout the seventies (all non-fictional except "Itinerant Ithacan") further illustrates, even more graphically than the Spanish experience, the peculiarities of Roth's winding geographical pilgrimage in search of a sense of ethnicity. A few years after the Seville sojourn, Roth composed a short piece, "No Longer at Home" (1971) in answer to a request from the *New York Times* to explain his prolonged silence. The piece opens with a familiar reference to the discontinuation of the East Side Jewish milieu as a result of the family's move to Harlem and closes with the first public expression of his new commitment to Israel (168, 170). This commitment becomes intensified in the brief "Kaddish" (1977), again a memoir which traverses the key phases of the artist as a young man and the writer's block, to conclude on a hopeful note: "it was Israel, a revitalized Judaism, that revitalized the writer, his partisanship a new exploration into contemporaneity" (190).

27 "Itinerant Ithacan," published only months after "Kaddish," is prefaced by this allegorical geographical image from Dante, suggesting completion or fulfilment: "O brothers, I said, who through a hundred thousand perils, Have arrived at the west" (Inferno, XXVI). Dante's epigraph is symbolic of Roth's having (re)discovered a strong literary voice, since the story clearly instances the literary technique of *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, the two-level narrative Roth was experimenting with in the later seventies. Thematically, however, the story's duplex development relies on images of strain, fragmentation and loss which bind the two Roths across fifty years of existence, in the 1920s and in 1977, only resolved with R's present reconciliation with M, following a crisis over her accompanying Roth to Holy Land, where the writer was invited to an artists' centre in 1977. Only in this final expectation of the prospective visit to Israel does the writer/protagonist attain the contentment of Dante's traveller, although, ironically, this is not a westward journey.

28 In the latter half of 1977, Roth wrote two brief related pieces from Jesuralem. In the first, "Report from Mishkenot Sha'ananim," mainly descriptive of the new surroundings and acquaintances, Roth concludes with a reported conversation on the nature of *aliya* (moving to Israel) as a response to the unbearable ambivalence of *galut* (Diaspora), defined as retaining a sense of Jewish identity while conforming to the standards of a non-Jewish community. In *Shifting Landscape*, Mario Materassi provocatively frames the ending of the "Report" by appending two antithetical comments, by Roth in, respectively 1965 and in 1977: "I feel no cultural affinity for Austria, though I was born there, nor for

Israel, though I'm a Jew"[14]; "I could be perfectly happy in Albuquerque, but the logic of my literary development seems to require that I live in Israel" (225).

29 In the latter piece, the third-person "Vale Atque Ave," written only days prior to the Roths' return to the States, the writer asserts his commitment to *aliya*, "his choice to cast his lot with Israel" (227). Significantly, however, the particulars of this choice and its follow-up would illustrate yet again the predicament of a writer who was always envisioning "a world elsewhere." Although it is the Mishkenot centre and the Jerusalem mayor who have hosted the writer and his wife, Roth expressed his preference for settling in the more cosmopolitan Tel-Aviv on the grounds that this was "the one city in Israel where he could still discern the vestiges of his boyhood. It was the one city that paralleled and evoked the East Side. For him, the keyword was not *roots*; the keyword was *continuity*" (227). Somehow, of course, such a statement was also foreshadowing that Henry Roth's definitive journey could (and would) only be made in terms of literary imagination and artistic recovery. Roth finally accepted that neither could this Israeli metropolis be a substitute for the long-lost East Side, because the Otherness of the language, of the culture, and even of the landscape were ultimately impossible to bridge, in spite of his ideological and emotional attachment to Judaism. In an intense conversation with Materassi, Roth explained that he felt,

> essentially, like a foreigner [in Israel]. I mean, here's the land I espoused, here's the land I identified with, here's the people and so forth – but, as an individual, as a person, I'm a *foreigner* here... It is not the land, it is not the culture... it is not that profound, that wonderful, deep culture that the English language, that English literature, has given me...
> For me Israel is a new land... This is not my soil. But, again, one has to remember this is a Jew speaking, a Diaspora Jew. And that the only time he ever felt a sense of belonging to both a place and a people was during the short period when he lived in a Jewish mini-state, and he didn't know it. (230)

30 Appropriately to the life-long sense of restlessness, that so often haunts his short story protagonists, and which the writer exorcised in his art more successfully than in his life, in the 1980s Roth and his wife Muriel were living in a mobile home in Albuquerque, perhaps the most expressive symbol of Roth's attempts to negotiate a geography of loss. It was there that, finally, Henry Roth achieved his reconciliation with a sense of place and with a sense of continuity through fiction. With *Mercy of a Rude Stream* he returned, in an outstanding and totally unexpected fashion, both to the long-deferred completion of his *Bildungsroman*, only possible within the aesthetics of the novel, and to the crucial New York years which made – and yet also unmade – the artist from the boy, the divided David Schearl reincarnated into the still-traumatised Ira Stigman. Along with the critical rediscovery of *Call It Sleep*, a significant part of the author's short works, by signifying in various modes Henry Roth's motions and halts across the maps of artistic, social, cultural, historical and ethnic loss, became instrumental in the healing process that eventually made his return to a life-long fictional project possible.

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NOTES

1. Lyons highlights Roth's joining the Communist Party in 1933 as an instance of such guilt. Ironically, one of the (few) harsh attacks on *Call It Sleep* came from an early anonymous review in *New Masses*, a publication of the Communist press: "It is a pity that so many young writers drawn from the proletariat can make no better use of their working class experience than as material for introspective and febrile novels" (quoted in Lyons 16-17).

2. This period, broadly speaking, ranges from the aftermath of *Call It Sleep*'s publication up to Roth's devoting full attention to the *Mercy of a Rude Stream* manuscript.

3. All ensuing comments by Roth and references to Roth's work are taken from this volume, unless otherwise specified.

4. This section of *Call It Sleep*, with its juxtaposition of David's inner voice and the external voices technically foreshadows the main formal feature of *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, although its purpose here is disruptive rather than dialogic.

5. L.S.Dembo notes: "It is significant that here...the climactic episode should come to [David] not as a single and unified vision but as a fragmentary rush of highly distinct and sharply perceived images. This is the Imagist way of perceiving reality; its triumph is... aesthetic, not epistemological" (82).

6. Roth started out writing *Call It Sleep* as straightforward autobiography, but was drawn to an aesthetic reconfiguration of his work, discarding the manuscript's original 70 pages in the process (Lyons 12).

7. On Roth's original aim to bring *Call It Sleep* up to the child's adolescence, see Lyons 13.

8. Only the opening fragment of that novel, "If We Had Bacon", accidentally survived through its publication in the small magazine *Signatures: Works in Progress*. (21-44). Cf. also Roth's comments, throughout several interviews between 1967 and 1983, on the more specific details of his writer's block, appended to this fragment by Mario Materassi in *Shifting Landscape*, pp. 44-47.

9. In the *Call It Sleep* scene (Book III, chapter 8) David remains an unnamed Jewish boy (a 'sheeney') for the three bullies, yet Roth makes a point of individualizing *them* as Pedey, Sweeney and Weasel, so that their primitive behaviour becomes unequivocally related to their Irish origin.

10. Lyons recalls Sidney Knowles's angle: "Knowles suggested ... that Roth was unable to deal with more recent material; in [his] words, 'As long as he wrote about childhood, there was a certain comfortable distance between Roth and his material. It was an art not quite grounded in reality, like the horses in training and 'seemed at times in flight'" (Lyons 148).

11. Although not exactly comparable to the technique in "Itinerant Ithacan" or in *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, this story is a precedent of this later fiction in that it employs the "two-level narrative" uniting an episode in the past with its perception from the present.

12. The influence that T.S. Eliot's core text had on Roth's sense of fragmentation and loss becomes evident in R's attachment to it in "Itinerant Ithacan."

13. Roth's political pieces on international politics or the Arab-Israeli conflict will not be addressed in this essay, although they clearly do echo his increasing sensitization to Judaism throughout the period.

14. This attitude is explicated further in Roth's brief contribution to the 1963 Midstream symposium, "The Meaning of *Galut* in America Today," which concludes, "the fairly intensive conditioning of my own childhood with regard to Judaism...has been abandoned to the extent possible.... I can only say, again, that to the great boons Jews have already conferred upon humanity, Jews in America might add this last and greatest one: of orienting themselves toward ceasing to be Jews" (114).

ABSTRACTS

Dans cet essai, je me propose d'examiner la plupart des nouvelles que Henry Roth a écrites entre 1940 et 1980 comme autant de signes de la difficulté qu'il éprouve alors à se situer et (se) représenter dans l'espace. Ce qui me permettra de tracer une « cartographie de la perte » chez

lui. Par "perte" j'entends aussi bien le malaise de Roth par rapport à l'espace – dans des termes esthétiques, culturels et ethniques – que la douleur traumatique inséparable de ce malaise. Cette perte trouve sa source dans un espace géographique codifié : la plupart des nouvelles (et parfois quelques récits non-fictionels) présentent des personnages d'inspiration autobiograhique qui tentent la traversée de frontières socio-économiques, ethno-culturelles, historiques et politiques pour se déplacer sur le lieu de « l'Autre. » De manière générale, les nouvelles et récits brefs de Roth peuvent être lus comme un processus de réconciliation de l'écrivain avec l'esthétique et le sens de l'identité que Roth a d'abord perdus après la réception de Call It Sleep, puis retrouvés soixante ans plus tard à travers la création de Mercy of a Rude Stream.

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